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Deadly Detroit streets led major to a purpose

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RICHARD JOHNSON/Detroit Free Press

DOHA, Qatar —
How did he get here?

How did Maj. Mike Carter end up on the telephone, sitting between two top-secret computers, tracking Iraq's Scud missiles, in a room guarded by barbed wire? How did he go from a rough neighborhood on the west side of Detroit to the nerve center for military intelligence?

He's here because he saw so many people die.

Carter was 11 when he saw his first killing. Somebody went into the house across the street, near Woodward and West Grand. "It was a rifle," he remembers. Someone went in and shot up the house. I was next door. About three bodies came out of that house. It was over drugs."

Next time, he was 14, sitting on his porch. He watched two guys go into a house, heard the shots, saw them walk out, get into a car and scurry away. Carter was too scared to run, too scared to move.

A couple of hours later, the paramedics brought out two dead bodies. "It was over

drugs," he says. "I saw a lot of gang fights."

The temptations were constant.

"Hey, man, you want a joint?"

Carter said no and kept walking — to school, to the store, to Calvary Baptist Church.

"Hey, man, you want to make some ome money?"

Of course, he wanted the money.

In his teens, he lived near Grand River and Schoolcraft, and he had to catch two buses everyday to attend Northern High School. But he kept walking, kept saying no, just like his mother taught him.

Dessie Colbert, now 58 and still in Detroit, was a single mother, trying to raise three girls and a boy. "She's my hero," Carter says. "She means a great deal. She's been an inspiration because of the type of person she is. There was no harshness, no screaming, yelling or beatings. She's a very calm person who had nothing but great things in mind for her children."

Carter was 15 the first time he thought he was going to die, the first time he could sense the door swinging shut. He was riding a bike with a friend and they ended up in the wrong neighborhood. A gang surrounded them.

"What you doing here?" somebody asked. "Kill 'em."

The gang members grabbed abag and went for a gun, but for some reason he can't understand to this day, someone intervened — or rather, something intervened.

"Let them go," somebody said.

That's how he got here.

"It was shock therapy," Carter says. "I saw some things at an early age that you don't want to see, but you do. It made me make some choices."

CARTER JOINED the Junior ROTC program at Northern High School, drawn to the discipline and sense of community, needing a sense of purpose. "That put me on the right path. I had two great instructors, both Vietnam veterans, and they could both relate to the kids. If you chose to listen to them and listen to what they said, it gave you a lot of inspiration and energy to move forward."

After graduating from Eastern Michigan University, he joined the Army and was commissioned second lieutenant in 1986. Since then, he has risen through the ranks, bouncing through bases in Germany, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas. He did a stint at the Pentagon, working for Vice Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Joseph W. Ralston, who recently retired as supreme allied commander in Europe.

"It was an awesome experience," Carter says. "You were able to see what happens at the highest levels of our government with our military."

Within the next two months, Carter is to be promoted to lieutenant colonel. Some lieutenant colonels, who later make full colonel, can become brigadier generals in about eight years.

"I was selected early for major," Carter says. "There was never an intention of coming out of college and saying, 'I'm fast-tracking. I'm going to be a general.' . . . I was in the right place, right time. Good mentorship brought me a long way, and work ethic."

For the last 21.2 years, he has worked in the Joint Operation Center, a top-secret room filled with computers and experts from every branch of the military. It is a long, narrow building, 60 feet by 22 feet, with brown carpeting and

no windows, just a single door at one end. Down the length of the room, there are two rows of desks, pushed together into a 50-foot long table with plastic chairs on both sides.

Thirty to 50 officers work in the JOC at any particular time, and everybody has a specialty.

Every work station has two to four computers, at least one video screen and a phone. The stations, which sit side by side, include the Ground Desk, Air Desk and Navy Desk.

For 12 hours a day, Carter runs the Theater Missile Defense Desk. If there is a war and Iraq launches a Scud missile attack, Carter will play a major role in stopping it.

For now, it's a game of chess. If there is intelligence that Iraq has moved a Scud missile, Carter decides how to counter. Perhaps he'll



PHOTO BY J. A. B. / AP Wirephoto

make a recommendation to move a missile defense system. Or perhaps he'll wait, because some of the information that comes into the JOC is unreliable.

Carter says: "I'm just glad to be part of history . . . this is an exciting time, making decisions or making sure the right choices are made for those troops because their lives are on the line."

Carter sits at a desk at the far end of the room. On the wall, there are four large plasma televisions that can show troop movements, ship locations, real-time video and CNN. Two more screens hang above his head.

"You've got the cream of the crop on the JOC floor," Carter says. "There's no doubt about it. These guys are good. You don't see folks running with their hair on fire or banging against the walls, saying, 'I can't take it anymore.' You see folks who have been well trained over the years."

During the 1991 Persian Gulf War, they used paper maps, pins and sticky notes in the JOC to locate troops. Now, they move icons on a computer screen. They send information by email and through top-secret Web sites, although they never mix messages with differing levels of clearance. The intelligence comes in many forms: the exact locations of ships or troops from global positioning systems to weather reports. to the commanders.

If Iraq launches Scud missiles, Carter is confident that U.S. forces can handle it. "We learned lots of lessons from Desert Storm," he says.

IN HIS SPARE TIME, Carter reads novels by John Grisham and books on military history. He carries himself with a rigid posture — head held high, shoulders back — but it's softened with a warm personality and easygoing smile.

He has been deployed for more than a month and misses being in his backyard in Tampa — by his pool on a hot Saturday afternoon, barbecuing chicken for his wife, Angela, and their two children, Ashley, 13 and Brittany, 9.

"I miss the weekends," he says, "a quiet Saturday."

He and Angela will have been married 15 years next month. She works full time in the accounting department for a pharmaceutical company in Tampa while getting the kids to school and soccer games.

"She's got a great attitude," Carter says. "We talk every day. Some days she has good days; some days she has bad days. She's 110-percent behind me and what I'm doing over here. She's a good definition of a great military wife."

This summer, as part of his service, Carter will head the Military Science Department (ROTC) at Jackson State, as well as Mississippi Valley State University.

"I wanted to give something back," he says. Angela is busy, getting the house ready to rent and to find a new place to live. "I start June 15 or whenever this is done," Carter says. "I'll be a professor for a year and then command a battalion."

Last month, he was selected to take command of an Army battalion in summer 2004. "I will be a leader of a battalion that averages 500 to 550 soldiers," he says. "You have a staff and a lot of folks helping you out. It's what Army officers strive for, when they come in, to lead soldiers. I have the opportunity to do that, and I'm looking forward to it."

Why does he do it?

"I just want to be a part of something purposeful, something worthwhile," he says. "If you are 85 years old and on your deathbed, you want to look back and ask: What have you done?"

"I want to lie there and say that I've accomplished something. And this is something that I can be satisfied with. I want to look back and say, 'I did my best.'"

Send feedback to Jeff Seidel and Richard Johnson at potraitsofwar@freepress.com.